

KINDRED¹

By HARRIET MAXON THAYER

(From *The Midland*)

IF I had had a less positive sense of revulsion for him, I might have been able to treat him with more contempt, certainly with more indifference. It was a part of Con Darton's power that those who knew him should waver in their judgments of him, should in turn reproach themselves for their hardness of heart and then grow angry at their own lack of assuredness. Perhaps it was the disquieted gray eyes in the lean leathery face, or the thin-lipped mouth that I had seen close so foxly after some sanctimonious speech, or the voice which, when not savage with recrimination, could take on a sustained and calculated intonation of appeal,—perhaps these things aroused my interest as well as my disgust. Certain it is that other men of a like feather, sly, irascible, gone to seed in a disorderly Illinois town, I should have avoided. I made the excuse of Lisbeth, and it was true that her welfare, first as his daughter and later as the wife of my friend, was very dear to my heart. Yet that could not explain the hypnotism the man had for me, befogging, as it sometimes did, an honest estimate.

There were, of course, moments of certainty. I recalled village anecdotes of bitter wrangles among the Dartons with Con always coming out best. They were a quarreling pack of sentimentalists. From all accounts Miss Etta must have been at that time a rugged girl of twenty-eight, of striking, if ungentle, appearance; and only the unsteadied sensibilities and the too-ready acrimony could have foreshadowed the large blatant woman she was to become, a woman who alternated between a generous

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flow of emotion on the one hand and an unimaginative hardness on the other. Only Lin Darton could have given promise then of the middle-class, semi-prosperous business man who was to justify the Darton tradition. But from all that I could gather of those younger days, before Con's marriage to Selma Perkins, he was the cock of the walk, holding the reins over them all by virtue of his shrewdness, apparently understanding the robust, over-blooded strains of their temperament and not unwilling to sound these at his pleasure.

My own experience dates back to the first time that he stood out for me a vivid picture in that sagging barn-like old farmhouse behind the elms. I was ten years old then, and I was already beginning to think highly of my father's profession, which that winter had sent him into a nest of small asthma-ridden towns. It was my privilege to trot by his side, carrying his worn black medicine case and endeavoring vainly to keep pace with his long jerky strides. On this particular occasion he had been summoned suddenly to the Dartons'; and, being unable to leave promptly, had sent me ahead posthaste with instructions, and an envelope of white pills to be taken "only in case of extreme pain."

Arriving at the farmhouse, the peaked façade of which, built to suggest an unbegotten third story, looked more hideous than ever among the bare branches, I knocked with reddened knuckles at the door. There was no response; at last, my half-frozen hand smarting with the contact of the wood, I pushed open the door and went in.

It was very still inside — a strange unnatural stillness. Even Greta and Martie, the two little plain-faced girls, were not to be seen; the drab, rose-patterned carpet muffled my footsteps, which, for some inexplicable reason, I made as light as possible. The room, faded, and scrubbed to the point of painfulness, gave only two signs of disorder, a crumpled book of verse open on the table and a Bible lying face down on the worn, orange-colored sofa. But there was something vaguely uncanny about the whole house; the very air seemed thin, like the atmosphere of approaching death. An unnameable terror took hold of

me. I waited, fearing to call out. A door shut upstairs. There were footsteps, and the sound of voices,—a man's and a woman's—whispering. Then more footsteps. This time some one was taking no trouble to walk lightly.

"Quietly now," the woman's voice cautioned.

"Ye said it was a boy?" This was Mr. Darton's voice, unmistakable now.

"I didn't say," the woman's whisper floated down to me as a door creaked open. "But it *is*—a girl. You must be ver—"

Her words were cut off by the report of a door banging shut. There was the sibilant sound of a breath being drawn in and, at the same moment, Mr. Darton's voice again.

"What the hell made ye think I'd want to see another *girl* for?" he growled.

A pause followed, the emptier for the preceding stridor of his voice. Then—"You c'n get along now—we ain't got no more call fur neighbors."

With that he came stamping down the stairs and slouched into the front room, where, upon his catching sight of me, a frightened look crossed his face, followed, almost instantly, by a queer expression, a mixture of relief and cunning that gave his face a grotesqueness that I can recall to this very day.

"Well, boy," he said in that low drawl and wavelike inflection of the voice that I was to learn to know so well, "yer father sent ye, did he?"

I proffered the note and the pills, and he frowned at them a second before pocketing them.

"Come—*he-re*." He seemed to pull at the words, giving each a retarded emphasis. As I approached, he drew me towards him, where he had sunk on the dingy, orange-fringed sofa. "N-ow, y're a nice young fellow—a bit scrawny, though. Ye—gotta horse?"

I shook my head.

"N-ow, then—ye aughtta have a h-orse. Yer pappy should see to't."

His gray eyes, then almost blue against the loose brown skin of his face, held me speechless.

"N-ow I gotta horse—a fine horse fur a boy. Ye

might ride her — like to? Then, if yer pappy wanted, he cou'd buy her fur ye? ”

I looked at him in doubt.

“ Yes, he could. Yer pappy has more money than anyone hereabouts, and it ain't right—I tell you, it ain't *right* to have a little boy like you and not give him — eve-ry thing he wants! ”

His last words ended in that slow climactic inflection that made whatever he said so indisputable. It was not unlike the minister's voice, I thought; and, my glance chancing to fall on the opened Bible, I was about to question him, when the door was pushed back hurriedly, admitting my father's lank, wiry figure along with a stream of chilling air.

“ G-ood morning, Mr. Brighton — a f-ine morning. ”

“ Morning, Darton, ” said my father crisply. “ Can I go directly upstairs? ”

“ No hurry n-ow, Doctor. It's all over. Mrs. Carn's been here all morning and — ”

It was at this moment that Mrs. Carn, her eyelids red from weeping, an old bumpy, red worsted shawl over her head, came nervously into the room; and, without so much as even a nod to any of us, edged quickly out of the front door.

“ Well — ” began my father, his clear, scrutinizing eyes fixed on Darton.

“ A-nother sign, ” expostulated Mr. Darton, “ of what ye might call the smallness of human van-ity. We must forgive 'er. Ye see Selma was gettin' so upset with her rancorous gossipin'— perhaps I should have been more careful — but it was a question of Selma and — ”

“ Quite right, Darton, ” my father nodded to him. “ I'm going up for a moment. ”

I had walked to the front window with its starched, lacy curtain; and stood still, looking out in a puzzled maze at the strangeness of the morning's happenings, a certain sense of disconsolateness stealing over me. Beyond the row of dark, spare trees I could see a gaunt figure in a black skirt and a bumpy red shawl moving along the road; and the picture of her, scurrying away, remained, as such apparently unimportant figures often

will, sharply engraven on my mind. As I recall it in late years, I often wonder how my father could have mistaken the lying, rancorous woman of Con Darton's description for this stern-lipped creature, who had gone by wordlessly, shutting the door gently behind her, a door that she was never to re-open.

I turned to find myself alone in the room. Mr. Darton had disappeared as unexpectedly but more quietly than he had entered. I could hear my father's footsteps going softly about upstairs; and his voice, which though quick and crisp, had a soothing quality, talking in a gentle monotone to some one. After about ten minutes he came to the head of the steps and called to me.

"Mrs. Darton says will you come up, Tom?"

Knees quivering with the queerness of it all as well as with the icy frigidity of the hallway, I mounted the uncarpeted stairs.

Following in the direction of the voices, I came to a dark, low-ceilinged room with a pine bed, on which lay a withered-looking woman with sparsely lashed eyelids and fine, straight, straw-colored hair. Near her was a small oblong bundle, wrapped round with a bright patch-work quilt; and out of this bundle a cry issued. As I peered into it, a red weazened face stared back at me, the eyes opening startingly round. I looked long in wonder. The woman sighed; and, my gaze reverting to her, I thought suddenly of what a neighbor had once said to my father, "Selma Perkins used to be the prettiest girl in school. She was like the first arbutus flowers." Surely this woman with her pallid skin and her faded spiritless eyes could not have been the one they meant!

There was some talk between my Father and his patient, the gist of which I could not get, absorbed as I was with the face inside the patch-work quilt. We went out silently, after I had taken a last, long look into the bundle.—Lisbeth had come into my world.

Some twenty years were to go by before I was to realize the significance of the scene that I had witnessed that winter morning at the old frame farmhouse. It was the year of my return to America with Jim Shepherd, whose

career as a rising young painter had just begun to be heralded, that I felt impelled to revisit the place of my childhood. Not my least interest lay in seeing Lisbeth again. I remembered her as a fragile upstanding girl of twelve with soft hair the color of dead leaves and gray inquiring eyes. But whatever it was that I was to find I was conscious that I would see it with new appreciation of values. For if my eight years of medical work abroad had sharpened my discernment, even more had my intimacy with Jim Shepherd swept my mind clean of prejudice and casuistry.

To strangers Jim must often have appeared naive and undevious. The fact was that his passion for truth-probing and his worship of the undiscovered loveliness of life had obscured whatever self-consciousness had been born in him. Meeting him for the first time was like entering another element. It left you a little flat. That candor and eagerness of his at first balked you, it made negligible your traditions of thought and speech. One ended by loving him.

On our arrival at the sparse little village I told him of the Dartons. I had had no news of them for the past four years, and inquiries among the neighbors left me only the more at sea. Lisbeth they seldom saw, they said; she never went to church or meetings; and, especially since her mother, in an unprecedented flare of rebellion, had gone to live with a married sister in town, she had grown silent and taciturn. As for old Con Darton, he was going to seed, in spite of the remnants of an earlier erudition that still clung to him. That is, though he went about unshaven and in slovenly frayed clothing, he still quoted fluently from the Bible and Gray's "Elegy." Among the villagers he had come to have the reputation of a philosopher and an ill-used man. He was poor, it seemed, so poor that he had abandoned the white farmhouse and had come to live in a box-like, unpainted shack at the foot of the hill, the new boarding of which stood out harshly against the unturfed soil. Built just across the way from a disused mill, near the creek, it had become known as the "mill house." In spite of this thriftiness, Con always had money for a new horse, which he would

soon trade off for a better; although these transactions had, of late, become fewer, as Con was feared as a "shrewd one." The fact seemed to call forth his neighbors' admiration, just as the tale that he had been "deserted" called forth their pity. Lisbeth, they averred, who had stuck to him, was "a hard piece to get close to."

She was standing at the bottom of the hill where the creek ran between the deserted mill and the new shack; and, as I came down the hill, I felt a sharp twinge of pain at the contrast of the fragile line of her profile against the coarse, dark sweater, at the slender grace of her body against that dead, barn-sprinkled background. I could observe her easily without her knowledge, for she was looking up, as we so often used to at twilight, to the old plank high above the sagging mill, where the turkeys fly to roost towards evening, so awkwardly and comically, with a great breathless whirring of wings. I saw her lift her arms to them with a swift, urging gesture, as though to steady their ungainly flight, and I could not be certain that she was not talking to them. Again a pang for the contracting loneliness of those bitter winters that she had lived through and must still live through, stabbed me.

She turned with a low cry and a momentary flush of gladness. But I noticed, as I questioned her as an old friend might, that the flush melted into a level pallor, and her eyes, deeper and more unquiet than I had remembered them, either wandered up the road or reverted to the last of the turkeys soaring heavily to rest.

"I used to do all those things, Tom," she said in answer to my question.

"Used to?" I laughed. "Why, it's only five years ago I was hearing that you were the best little lady on skis and skates at the West-Highlands."

Her eyelids quivered at the word.

"That year — yes," she said and averted her face.

"You mean —" I had to prod, there was no other way about it — "that you only stayed — one year?"

She nodded.

"My Freshman year prep school."

"And then — ?"

"I was needed here."

"Your father — ?"

"Yes,— he needed me."

"There was Grega," I insisted. "She was the man of the family."

"She's married, you know."

I recalled having heard of an unsatisfactory marriage. So she had escaped!

"And Martie?"

"Working at a store in town."

A dull rage charred at the inner fibres of my being. Here was Lisbeth, the most delicate and responsible of them all, with, I supposed, much of her mother's early gentleness and beauty, interred in this —. I did not like to dwell on it. I switched back to skating.

"Come now. One does not forget these things at twenty or twenty-one."

She smiled at me ever so faintly, a smile that sent the winter chill of that arid spot scurrying into my veins.

"One grows old fast — in the country," was all she said.

I thought of the flying figures that I had met in Norway and Sweden. It was a moment before I spoke, and then I said the wrong thing.

"But it's this very sort of air, they say, that makes for vigor — and —"

"Yes," she said thinly, "those who live in cities — say so."

She turned, her meagre dress flapping about her knees like a flag. But at the foot of the rickety outer steps that ran across the bare front of the shack crookedly, like a broken arm, I caught her by the wrist.

"You'll be going to Mrs. Carn's funeral tomorrow, Lisbeth?"

She shook her head and I thought she paled.

It was an unheard of thing for the whole population not to turn out for the funeral of one of the villagers, and Mrs. Carn, I knew, had befriended Lisbeth, in spite of Old Con's displeasure. She must have noted my surprise, for she turned on me squarely, facing me with what seemed at the time an unnecessary display of staunchness,

"Perhaps you didn't know," she said very softly, "that the Minister — couldn't come — and —"

She paused, while I made some inadequate reply, for I, too, seemed caught in the sort of mirthless evasion that engulfed her.

"He —" she made a slight backwards motion of the head towards the upper room of the shack — "is going to — preach."

My startled exclamation must have disclosed all the horror I felt at this announcement, but, before I could speak again, she had gone swiftly up the rickety steps and pushed shut the flimsy board door behind her.

The next afternoon was one that I have never been able to erase from my mind, for even more vividly than my earlier impressions of Con Darton, it marked the wizardry as well as the fearfulness of his power. A hundred times during that burial service the sound of a banged door and a rasped voice sounded in my ears and the sight of a tense, hurrying figure in a black dress and a bumpy red shawl moved before my eyes. The thin figure was lying there now and over it, his rusty black coat tails curving in the wind, like wings bent to trap the air, his gray eyes misty with emotion, hovered the man whose door she had never entered since that fateful day of Lisbeth's birth. I could not but feel that the vision of him standing there told the story of his triumphs more grimly than any recital.

The service began in a sharp, fine drizzle of rain, through which his voice sang in shifting cadences, now large and full, now drooping to a premonitory whisper with an undeniably dramatic quality. In spite of myself the words stirred within me. As he read and spoke he laid aside the turns of speech that had become his through years of association with country folk. Almost he was another man.

"Man that is born of woman —"

The words reached down through the overlying structure of thought and habit. I felt a giving and a drawing away; saw the crowd sway to his will.

"In the midst of life we are — in death."

Again the tones woke me to a sharper sense of the

scene. Tears stood in many eyes. The people had melted at his touch. They were his. For a while I lost myself in watching them, until again a changed intonation drew me back to the man before us.

"We therefore commit her body to the ground — earth to earth — ashes to ashes — dust to dust —"

My will was powerless to resist the beautifully delivered lines, to doubt the integrity of the man who uttered them. The little lumps of wet earth that he threw against the coffin struck against my heart with a sense of the futility of all things. And then as suddenly, drawn by something compellingly alive and pervading, I glanced at Jim, who stood next to me; and catching the slant of his vision followed it to the edge of the crowd, where, her thin dress clinging to her knees, her face almost blue with cold, stood Lisbeth; and there was across her eyes and mouth an expression of contempt and loathing such as I had never seen in a girl so young. Jim was watching her intently, noting, with that certain appraisal of his, the etched profile; and, with all an artist's sensibility, reading life into the line of head and shoulders. What if — the idea went through my mind with the intensity of sudden pain — what if Jim and Lisbeth — ? The sound of sobbing broke in upon my reverie. Con Darton was delivering the funeral oration.

"My friends," I heard him saying through the streams of thought that encompassed me, "we are here out of respect for a woman all of ye knew,— and whose life — and whose character — ye all — knew." He paused to give more weight to what he was about to say. "Margaret Carn was like the rest of us. She had her qualities — and she had her — failings. I want to say to you today that there's a time fur knowing these things — and a time fur — forgettin' them." His voice on the last words dropped abruptly away. There was the sound of rain spattering among the loosened lumps of clay. "Such a time is now." His left hand dropped heavily to his side. "I tell you there is more rejoicing in Heaven over one sinner who repenteth than over ninety-and-nine —"

I grabbed Jim's arm to assure myself of something warm and human. But his eyes were still fixed on Lisbeth,

whose gaze was in turn riveted on her father's face. It occurred to me with a swift sense of helplessness that she and I were probably the only two who could even vaguely realize any of the inner motives of Con Darton's mind, as we certainly were the only persons who knew how great a wrong had been done to Margaret Carn's memory that day. To the rest she was stamped forever as a lying gossip, forgiven by the very man she had striven to harm. I shuddered; and Jim, feeling it, turned to me and drew me towards Lisbeth. Outside of the scattering crowd she saw us and greeted me gravely; then gave her hand to Jim with a little quickening gesture of trust.

We went down the road together, taking the longest way to the foot of the hill, Jim loquacious, eager; Lisbeth silent. The rain had melted into a soft mist, and through it her face took on a greater remoteness, a pallid, elfin quality. At the foot of the hill, which had to be climbed again to reach the old farmhouse, she stopped, glancing up to the plank where the turkeys were already roosting.

"Not going up the hill, Lisbeth?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"We live here now," she said.

"Not — ?"

"All the year round.— It's cheaper," she added with that little touch of staunchness that had become hers.

"But it's too —"

I was cut short by the look of anguish in her eyes, the most poignant sign of emotion that I had seen her show since my return. There was an awkward silence, while I stood looking at her, thinking of nothing so much as how her head would look against a worn, gold Florentine background, instead of silhouetted against these flat unchanging stretches of unbending roads and red barns. It seemed that she and Jim were saying something to each other. Then just as she turned to go, he stopped her.

"You'll forgive me, because I'm an old friend of Tom's," he was urging, "if I ask you to drive to town with Tom and myself for supper."

There was an incongruity in the request that could not have escaped either of them. I could see the color mounting to her temples and then ebbing away, leaving

her whiter than before. Her lips parted to answer, but closed again sturdily.

"It couldn't — be arranged. If it could, I should have liked to," she supplemented stiffly.

It was a stiffness that made me want to cry out to the hilltops in rebellion.

"But suppose it *could* be arranged?" suggested Jim. She looked away from us.

"It couldn't be," she replied in that same inflectionless voice.

It was her voice that cut so sharply. I reflected that it was only in the very old that we could bear that look of dead desire, that absence of all seeking, that was settling over her face.

"But you'll try," insisted Jim. "You won't say no now?"

With one reddened hand she smoothed the surface of her dress. "I'll try," she promised faintly.

Dinner over, prompted perhaps by a desire to look the old place over by myself, perhaps half inclined to pay a visit to Con, I left Jim in the library to his own devices, and stepped out alone along the road. The air was clear now, and the sleet had frozen to a thin crystal layer, a presage of winter, which glistened under the clear stars and sent them shivering up at me again. As I neared the mill house, I could hear voices through its scanty boarding, and decided, for the moment, to go on, following the bed of the creek, when an intonation, oddly familiar, brought me up like the crack of a whip. It is strange the power that sounds have to transport us, and again I saw a withered woman with straw-colored hair and a small, oblong bundle in a patch-work quilt. But, as I drew nearer, my thoughts were all for Lisbeth.

"Have my girl in town with that young *puppy*!" Old Con was rasping at her. "I know these artist-fellows, I tell you and —"

He ripped out an oath that took me bounding up the steps. My hand on the front door knob, however, I paused, catching sight of Lisbeth through the window. She was standing with her back towards the inner door her moth-like dress blending oddly with the pallor of her

cheeks, the smudgy glow of the lamp light laying little warm patches on her hair. But it was her eyes, wide and dark, that stopped me. There was pain in them, and purport, a certain fierce intention, that made me wonder if I could not serve her better where I was. And, as I waited, her voice seeped thinly through the boarding.

"I don't believe it."— Her voice came quietly, almost without intonation. "Tom Brighton wouldn't be his friend then.— They're both fine and straight — and —"

"They are, are they?" he jeered. "Ye've learned to tell such things out here in th' country, I suppose —"

"There are things," she retorted, "I've learned."

He began drawling his words again, as he always did when he had got himself under control.

"I suppose ye're *insinuat'in'* ye don't like it here— don't like what ye're pore ol' Father c'n do fur ye?"

Her look of contempt would have cut short another man.

"Ye — wantta — go?" he finished.

She nodded mutely. And at that he flared at her terribly.

"It's like ye," he shouted, "like yere mother, like all the Perkinses. Word-breakers! cowards! *shirkers!*"

The words seared. The careful articulation of the afternoon was gone.

"Promised — if I sent ye to school, ye'd stay here winters to look after ye're pore ol' Father — didn't ye?" He looked at her through narrow, reddish lids, where she had backed against the door. "Didn't ye?" he repeated.

"But soon's he's done fur — soon's his *money's gone* —"

"Stop!" she cried. "*Stop i* —" Her breath caught.

He stared at her, the words shaken from him by the sheer force of her. She had not moved, but, somehow, as she stood there against the unvarnished door facing him, fists at her side, eyes brilliant, she appeared to tower over him.

"I'll stay," she was saying in a queer, fierce monotone, "I'll stay here this winter anyhow if I freeze for it! I'll scrub and cook and haul wood for ye till I've paid ye back — *paid ye*," she repeated more softly, "till no one can say the Perkinses don't keep their word! And then —"

in the spring — I'm going — it'll be for good —. *For always*," she added, and turned limply towards the door.

To my surprise he sank heavily into the rickety chair by the stove.

"Go then," he muttered. "It's all I c'd expect."

The door closed on her and still he sat there before the fire, head bent forward, as though he had an audience. I shrank back closer into the shadows, drawing my coat collar more snugly about my throat. It was incredible that he should play a part before her — and now alone! His very posture suggested a martyred, deserted old man. I felt myself in the presence of something inexplicable. — Then, in a frenzy of suppressed rancor, such as I had never felt before, I climbed the hill, the lumps of mud and ice seeming to cling against my footsteps as I went.

The winter was a bitter one that year, such as only the winters in that Northern, prostrate land can be. The countryside appeared to crouch under a passive, laden-colored sky. Then the snow came settling in deeper and deeper layers, and, as it packed down, a coating of thin ice formed on its surface. One could walk on it at times, this crust that had grown over the land like a new skin.

We smuggled sweaters and coats to Lisbeth, making them old lest Con suspect us. But, even with all we could do for her, her suffering must have been without comparison. There was no fire in the shack except that in the old rusty cook stove which she tended, and the cold made an easy entrance through the loose carpentry of the walls. With it all there were the loneliness and the mental agony. At first, when she did not know how deep was Jim's devotion, there must have been times when life held out no promise to her except that of escape.

All this time the rest of the Dartons gave no sign. Old Con, I discovered, made occasional obscure trips to the city where he saw Lin Darton and Miss Etta, the former established as a second-rate real-estate dealer, the latter, as buyer for a large department store. Later it became more apparent that it was after these trip of his that he was able to purchase another horse. He quoted more and more frequently from the Bible and the

"Elegy." Such feeling as any of the neighbors may have had for Lisbeth was now completely turned aside by her tight-lipped reticence and her deft evasion of all references to her situation. Old Con was thoroughly established as a brilliant fellow, ruined by his family.

From the first I saw that the winter had to be endured, like a famine. Keep Jim away of course I could not, though I did persuade him, by dint of much argument, that it would be for Lisbeth's good to meet her away from the mill house; and what pleading he may have had with her to leave all and come with him, then and there, I could only imagine. Each time Lisbeth came back from these encounters a little paler, her lips a little firmer, her eyes burning with a steadier purpose. But it was the sort of purpose that robs instead of giving life, that strikes back on itself while it still clings to a sort of bitter triumph. Knowing her, I knew that it had to be so, for to despoil her of this high integrity would be to take from her something as essentially hers as was her sensitive spirit, her fine sureness of vision.

Se we kept silence until, as the first signs of spring came on again, while the country alternately was flooded or lay under rigid pools of ice, the line of her mouth seemed to soften and a glow crept into her eyes and a dreaming. I held my breath and waited. Thin she was, like something worn to the thread. The fine color had given place to a blue tint in the cold, and to a colorless gray as she bent over the old stove within. But the exquisitely moulded line of cheek and chin, the grace of motion and the deep questing light in her eyes nothing could destroy. I believe that, to Jim, she grew more lovely as she appeared to fade.

At last the day came when the water ran in yellowed torrents in the creek or stood in stagnant pools under a new sun, when the blood bounded, overwarm, in the tired body. That day Old Con caught sight of them, walking arm in arm at the top of the hill, looking down as though to find a footing, and talking earnestly. They had never before ventured so near the mill. Catching sight of them from some distance, I foresaw the meeting before I could reach them. When I came close enough to see,

Lisbeth was trembling visibly, as though from a chill, and Jim stood glowering down at Old Con.

Suddenly Lisbeth edged herself sideways between them, shouldering Jim away.

"Don't touch him!" she cried. "It's what he's waiting for you to do! Can't you see the look on his face — that wronged look of a man that's done nothing but wrong all his life?"

She stopped, the words swelling within her, too big for utterance. Jim put a quieting arm about her; and just then Old Con made an abrupt motion towards her wrist.

"I guess," he said, "that a father —"

But she was before him.

"Father! He's not my father, d'ye hear? I've kept my word to him and now I'm going to keep it to myself! You see that sun over the hills?" — She turned to Con. — "It's the spring sun — it's summer — summer, d'ye hear? And it's *mine* — and I'm going to have it, before I'm dead like my mother died with her body still living! You're no more my father than that dead tree the sun can't ever warm again! — It's for good — I said it would be for good — and it is!"

We took her, sobbing dryly, between us, up the road.

That night in our house Lisbeth was married to Jim. A deep serenity seemed to hang about her as though for the moment the past had been shut away from her by a mist. As for Jim, there was a wonder in his eyes, not unlike that I had seen when he came upon an old Lippo Lippi, and a great comprehending reverence. There were tears at the back of my eyes — then the beauty of the scene drove all else back before it.

There is one more episode in the life of Con Darton and Lisbeth. Knowing him, it would be incredible that there should not be. It happened some five years later and I was concerned in it from the moment that I was summoned unexpectedly to Mr. Lin Darton's office in the city, a dingy though not unprosperous menage located in the cheaper part of the down town district. I found him sitting amid an untidy litter of papers at the table, talking through the telephone to some one who later

developed to be Miss Etta; and I had at once a feeling of suffocation and closeness, due not alone, I believe, to the barred windows and the steaming radiator. The family resemblance that Mr. Lin Darton bore to Old Con threw into relief the former's honesty, and made more bearable his heavy sentimentalism, upon which Con had played as surely as on a bagpipe, sounding its narrow range with insistent evenness of response.

"I want to talk to you about Con," he said gravely, as soon as the receiver had been hung up, "and — Lisbeth." He uttered his niece's name as though it were a thing of which he could not but be ashamed.

I said nothing to this, and waited.

"As you are still in touch with her; and, as the situation is probably already partly known to you, I thought you might be able — willing —" He hesitated, paused; and a grieved look came into his eyes that was quite genuine. I realized the fact coldly.

"Whatever I can do," I assured him, "I shall be glad to."

"None of us," he continued, "have seen Lisbeth since that terrible night four years ago, when she turned Con away from her house."

I hesitated for a moment and then said: "It was three o'clock in the morning, if I remember, and he had written that he was coming to take her little son into the country, to give him a chance," I added bitingly, "of some real country air."

"It was a cold night," continued Lin Darton, as though he had not heard me, "and she has all she needs — while he —"

"To my mind, he had no business there!" I flared.

"He was her father."

He stared at me hard, as though he had uttered the final, indisputable word.

"He forfeited all right to that title years ago."

"When?" demanded Mr. Darton.

"On the day of her birth," I snapped back at him.

"I do not understand you," he said coldly. And, when I remained silent, he added: "There is no greater crime than that of a child towards a father."

"Unless it be, perhaps, that of a father towards a child."

His sadness seemed to weigh him against the desk. I relented.

"To go against one's *own* — *against one's own*," he repeated, "and Con so sick now —"

"You must forgive me, Mr. Darton, for my views," I said more gently, "and tell me what I can do."

He pulled himself together at that.

"Con's all gone to pieces, you know — at the old mill house — no money — no one to care for him. We wanted you to come out with us. Perhaps medical care might, even now — We thought maybe," he interrupted himself hastily, "that you could get Lisbeth to help out too — and maybe come herself —"

"Come herself!" I repeated, and my voice must have sounded the sick fear that struck me.

"Money's not the only thing that counts when it comes to one's own blood," he said sententiously.

There were no two ways about it, that was his final stand. So, having assumed them of my services that afternoon, I went straight to Lisbeth.

I found her bending over the youngest baby, and, when I told her, her body became rigid for an instant, then she stooped lower that I might not see the shadow that had fallen across her face. Finally she left the child and came to me with that old look of misery in her face that I had not seen there for so long, but with far more gentleness.

"Sit down here, Tom," she said, leading me to the window seat, where the strands of sunlight struck against her head, giving fire to her dull-brown hair. She had changed but slightly in appearance, I thought, from the girl that I had known five years before; still there *was* a change, a certain assurance was there, and a graciousness that came from the knowledge that she was loved.

"I think you know," she began, her eyes looking not at me but straight ahead, "that I've been happy — these five years — though perhaps not how happy. But in spite of it all — there is always that something — that *fear* here — clutching at me — that it may not all be real — that it can't last."

Again she looked at me and turned away, but not before I had caught a flash of terror in her eyes.

"Even with them all against me, Tom, I've stuck to it — to what I feel is my right. This is my home — and it's Jim's home — and the children's as well as it's mine — and, in a way, it's — inviolate. I've sworn that nothing ugly shall come into it — nothing shall ruin it — the way our lives were ruined out there!"

Her voice trembled, but her eyes, as she turned to me at the last, were steady.

"I'll send something, of course," she said; "you will take it to them. But I'll — not go."

With her message and her money I sought out Lin Darton and Miss Etta, and together we rambled in their open Ford along those flat, dead Illinois roads that I had not seen for so long.

It is a doctor's profession to save life, and there was a life to be saved, if it were possible. But he was nearer to the end than I had thought. Grega was there in that same barren room of the mill-house, doing things in a stolid, undeft sort of way. The bed had been pulled near the stove and the room was stuffier, more untidy than in the days when Lisbeth had been there. The creaky bed, the unvarnished walls, and the rusty alarm clock, that ticked insistently, all added to the sense of flaccidity. The afternoon was late and already dark; sagging clouds had gathered, shutting out what was left of the daylight. Miss Etta lit a smudgy lamp, sniffing as she did so.

From under the torn quilt the man stared back at me, with much of his old penetration, despite the fever that racked him.

"I — want — Lisbeth," were his first words to me.

I shook my head. "She cannot come just now," I told him, hand on his wrist. "But we are here to do everything for you."

"Tel-e-phone her," he said with his old emphasis on each syllable, "and tell — her that I'm — dy-ing. Don't answer me. You know that — *I — am dy-ing and I — want — her.*"

Miss Etta, the tears streaming over her large face, went to do his bidding. I could hear her lumber some

footsteps going down the crazy outside stairway. He gave me a triumphant look as I lifted his arm, then abruptly he drew away from me. He had an ingrained fear of drugs of any sort. There was no gainsaying his fierce refusals, so I made him as comfortable as I could while we waited. The end was very near. His face, thin almost to emaciation, was flushed to a deep, feverish red, but his lips took on a more unbending line than ever and his eyes burned like bits of phosphorescence in the semidarkness. For an hour he lay there motionless with only the shadow of a smile touching his lips at intervals.

Miss Etta had returned, letting in a gust of damp air, but bringing no definite answer from Lisbeth. Would she come? I remembered her unyielding decision, her unflinching sincerity. The rain broke now suddenly, and came roaring down the hill towards the creek. Outside the branches of elms dragged, with a snapping of twigs, across the brittle roof. A rusty stream of water crawled sizzling down the pipe of the stove. It was hot — hot with the intolerable hotness of steam. The patchwork quilt looked thick and unsmoothed. I reflected that it never could look smoothed. And how their personalities bore down upon one with a swamping sensation! Miss Etta and Greta and Mr. Lin Darton were gathered into a corner of the room and an occasional whispering escaped them. The oppression was terrific. I began to want Lisbeth, to long for her to come, as she would come, like a cool blade cutting through density. And yet — I was not sure. I found myself staring through the black, shiny surface of the window, seeking relief in the obscuring dark. It gave little vision, except its own distorted reflections, but I could distinguish vaguely the outlines of the old mill with the shadowy raft in the high branches and the smudgy round spots that I knew to be the turkeys roosting.

A fiercer current tore at the framework of the mill-house. The water rapped pitilessly against the pane. The brownish stream thickened, as it made its way down the stovepipe and fell in flat puddles on the tin plate beneath it. — *Would she come?*

"If she doesn't come now!" whimpered Miss Etta. "An awful girl — *awful!* "

I began hoping of a sudden that she would not come. Though I craved her presence in that insufferable room, I was afraid for her. A sort of nameless terror had seized me that would not be dismissed. Yet what worse thing than she had already endured could come from that bundle of loose clothes on the bed? The figure moved uneasily under the covers and made an indefinite motion. I could only guess at the words addressed to Miss Etta as she bent over him. She shook her head.

"No," she said audibly, "not yet."

With one brown, fleshless hand, that lay outside the covers, he made a gesture of resignation, but the gray eyes, turning towards me, burned black.

I could make out fragmentary bits of conversation that issued from the corner of the room.

"When it comes to one's own blood —"

The rest was lost in a surge of wind and rain.

"An awful girl—"

"She ought to be —"

A low rumble came down the hill, followed by a more terrific onslaught of rain. Outside the clap of a door came as a relief. There were steps, then, just as I had expected, the door was thrust back and she stood there letting in the fresh air of heaven, a slender sheaf of gray in her long coat and small fur toque.

A satirical gleam of triumph gleamed across the sick man's face and vanished, leaving him a wronged and silently passive creature.

"You can shut the door tight, now you've *come*," said Miss Etta. "A draft won't do him any good."

With this greeting she turned her back. There was a moment's silence, while Lisbeth pushed shut the flimsy door, and I, to cover her embarrassment, helped her make it fast. I noticed then that she was carrying a small leather case.

"Thermos bottles," she explained, as an aroma of comfort escaped them. But the man on the bed shook his head, as she approached.

"Not now," he said plaintively. His look reproached

her. Tears stood thickly in Miss Etta's eyes. She pulled Lisbeth aside with a series of jerks at her elbow.

"Too late for that now," I heard her whisper sententiously. And then: "You had your chance."

I saw the hand, that disengaged Miss Etta's clutch, tremble; and for an instant I thought the girl would break down under the benumbing thickness of their emotion. But she merely unfastened her coat, walking towards the window as though seeking composure, as I had, in the cold shadows without, in the blurred outlines of the old mill and the intrepid row of turkeys.

He beckoned to her, but she did not see him. Rapidly failing as he was, I was certain that he was by no means without power of speech. I touched her on the arm. His words came finally in monotonous cadences.

"I am dy-ing," he said. "You will — pray?"

I saw her catch her breath. My own hung in my throat and choked me. He was watching her intently now with overweighted gray eyes, that could not make one entirely forget the long cunning line of the mouth. What courage did she have to withstand this? He was dying — of that there could be little doubt. She had grown white to the roots of her hair.

"I do not pray," she said steadily.

His eyebrows met. "You — *do not pray?* Who — taught — you — *not to p — ray?*"

"You did," she said quietly.

He lay back with a sigh.

"Outrageous!" murmured Miss Etta through her tears. "An awful girl — *awful!*"

The man on the bed smiled. He lifted his hand and let it fall back on the cover.

"It's all right — all right — all — right." The reddish-brown eyelids closed slowly.

Involuntarily a wave of pity shook me. It was consummate acting. That a man should play a part upon the very edge of life held in it something awesome, compelling attention. I drew myself together, feeling his eyes, sharp for all their floating sadness, upon me. Was he — ? Was I — ? — A crackling of thunder shook the ground. When it had passed, the rain came down straight and

hard and windless like rapier thrusts. The room seemed, if possible, closer, more suffocating. He beckoned to Lisbeth and she went and stood near him. He was to put her through a still harder ordeal.

"You have never cared for me," he whispered.

There was no sound except for the steady pour outside and the rustle of Miss Etta's garments as she made angry motions to Lisbeth. Even at this moment, I believe, had he shown sign of any honest wish for affection, she would have given all she had.

"Not for many years," she said, and for the first time her voice shook.

"Ah — *h!*" His breath went inwards.

Suddenly he began to fumble among the bed clothes.

"The picture," he said incoherently, "your mother's picture. Pick it up," he ordered, his eyelids drooping strangely. "No — no — under the *bed*."

Before I could stop her she had dropped to her knees and was fumbling among the rolls of dust under the bed. An overpowering dread had clutched at me, forcing the air from my lungs. But in that instant he had raised himself, by what must have been an almost incredible exercise of will, and grabbed her by the throat.

"*Curse you!*" he cried, shaking her as one would a rat, "you and your mother — *cur* —"

His hands dropped away, limp and brittle like withered leaves. He fell back.—

Of course they will always find excuses for the dead, and eulogies. Even as I helped her into Jim's small curtained car and took my place at the wheel, I knew that the things that they would say about her would be more than I could bear. We plunged forward, and a moment later, rounding a curve, our headlights came full upon the outlines of the old farm with its hideous false façade. I could not resist glancing at her, though I said nothing. Her eyes were on her hands, held loosely in her lap. She did not look at me until, with another lurch, we had swung about again, and all but the road in front of us was drawn back swiftly into obscurity. I found that she had turned towards me then, and, as I laid one hand

across her arm, I felt her relax to a relieved trembling. Before us the night crowded down over the countryside, masking its ugliness like a film, through which our lights cut a white fissure towards town.